

detours on the road to equality: women, work and higher education

Women are earning college degrees in increasing numbers, but entering male-dominated occupations at a decreasing pace. These two developments are linked. Work barriers may be leading women to take a detour to college.



Photo by Mark Bosler

Women's resource center at a research university.

News stories about the first woman entering a field—astronaut, firefighter, professional basketball player, Ivy League university president—have largely faded, although Carly Fiorina's selection as head of Hewlett Packard was widely extolled in both the business and popular press. It is commonly assumed that the barriers that once blocked women's entry into new fields have been dismantled. But there has been less change than meets the eye. The slow but steady movement of women into formerly male-dominated occupations has tapered off, if not completely stopped, during the 1990s. Women have made greater strides, however, in their pursuit of higher education. Indeed, the second development may be the result of the roadblocks they are facing in finding employment in traditionally male fields.

layers of segregation

Despite highly visible exceptions, such as local television news anchor teams, most occupations remain skewed toward either men or women. For every news anchorwoman, there are literally thousands of women who work in traditional female settings such as at a receptionist's desk, in an elementary school classroom, or at the take-out window of a fast-food restaurant. Whether she is a white single mother in Florida or a black empty-nester in Michigan, a woman more

often works next to other women than to men. Women remain crowded in certain jobs such as secretaries or administrative assistants (99 percent female), child care workers (98 percent) or registered nurses (93 percent). Among the remaining male bastions are construction trades, such as carpenters, plumbers and electricians (3 percent female), mechanics and repairers (5 percent) and engineers (10 percent). This concentration of women and men in different jobs, occupations and industries is what sociologists mean when they refer to the gender segregation of work.

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Among the highest-status professions, law, medicine and management have experienced a large influx of women. Nearly half of managers, law students and medical students are women. But within these fields, gender disparities are unmistakable. Few female managers have reached the highest echelons of large corporations, and women middle-managers are less likely than their male counterparts to have authority over staffs and budgets. Female lawyers are more likely to be found in family law or working for the government than practicing in the more lucrative specializations at major firms. And female physicians are more likely to specialize in pediatrics or family practice than surgery or anesthesiology. Indeed, the closer you



Small group project in an education class of 60 college students, 52 of whom are female.

look within nominally integrated occupations, the more segregation you find. Men and women are segregated by occupation, by firms within occupation, and by jobs and specializations within firms. There are “men’s jobs” and “women’s jobs” at all levels of education, skills, and experience, and at each level, the women’s jobs tend to be paid less.

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Moreover, female-dominated fields pay less even when working time, qualifications and experience are taken into account.

One way to appreciate the income disparity is to compare the pay for male- and female-dominated occupations that have similar job qualifications. Women are 50 percent of bus drivers but only 3 percent of railroad conductors. Women are 71 percent of accountants and auditors but only 29 percent of securities and financial services sales representatives. Women are 88 percent of dressmakers but only 22 percent of upholsterers. In each of these cases, the male occupation pays more than the female one. These heavily-skewed numbers suggest that, despite good intentions, many jobs are not truly open to everyone.

explaining job segregation

Why do women and men end up in different occupations? A popular view is that gender distinctions at work are as natural as boys and girls playing separately on the school playground. But sociologists tend to view gender roles as social conventions rather than natural phenomena.

People are taught to distinguish men’s work from women’s work, just as they are taught right from wrong. Gender stereo-



Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society

World War II poster encouraging women to seek traditionally male occupations.

types in the workplace are readily apparent, even to young children, and are often self-perpetuating. Children in elementary school report without hesitation that nurses are usually women, and firefighters, engineers and presidents are usually men. Young girls may no longer be encouraged to stay home, but now many are encouraged to work in 'suitable' jobs that emphasize helping others. Ideals pressed on boys include abstract reasoning, competitive prowess in sports and business, tinkering with things and financial success.

But persistent sex segregation at work is not the simple product of young men and women's choices. American youngsters' occupational aspirations are notoriously fickle. Occupational goals change often during the teenage years. More than half of college students change majors at least once. Even workers in their 20s and 30s continue to change

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occupations. For example, women engaged in emotionally demanding jobs, such as assisting children with learning disabilities, suffer from burnout, while other women working in male-dominated fields find that such jobs are not always worth the isolation and long hours. That this turnover has failed to reduce sex segregation suggests that continued pressure to pursue sex-typed work lasts well into adulthood.

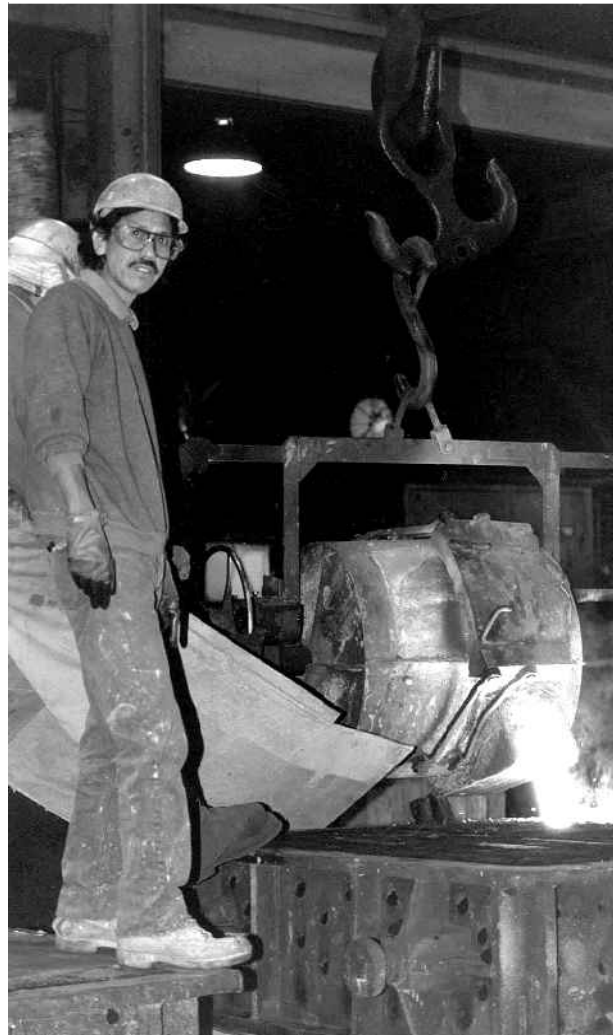


Photo by David Bacon

Steel pouring and fabrication. During World War II women were aggressively recruited into industry jobs that have since been filled almost exclusively by male workers.

For example, working in a masculine field can raise questions about a woman's femininity. Christine Williams found that female Marines feel they need to show how tough they are on the job but also how feminine they can be off the job. Men who work as nurses face some of the same issues, and respond by emphasizing the heroic aspects of nursing. Beyond the pressure of gender expectations, a web of social factors tends to press women into traditionally female occupations and hold them there in adulthood. Women have fewer acquaintances with knowledge about openings in male-dominated settings (see "Social Networks: The Value of Variety," this issue). They often lack the co-worker support necessary to succeed. They face job tasks and hours that assume a male breadwinner with a supportive stay-at-home wife. And their family and friends are often dubious about or hostile to a new

or unconventional occupation. Some of the remaining barriers to women's economic advancement are rooted in the structure of work. For example, excessive hours in a number of demanding fields limit the opportunities of those with parental and other caregiving obligations, especially mothers. Over the last 30 years, the work week has lengthened and the pace of work has intensified for many in the labor force, accentuating the strain on women.

Historical experiences also instruct us about just how flexible these gender distinctions can be. When seats in medical school classrooms became vacant during World War II, young women rushed to fill them. Other women were recruited to fill manufacturing jobs, with the media stressing how the required skills were similar to women's domestic talents. In the 1960s young women switched rapidly from education



Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society

Woman training to be a welder during World War II.

hiring discrimination

A female Assistant Attorney General called the exclusive Cipriani's restaurant in New York City requesting an interview for a job on the dining room staff and was told by a manager, on tape, "we don't hire girls." In fact, this restaurant had never hired a waitress, and the Attorney General sued for hiring discrimination. In depositions, Cipriani's claimed that there were few, if any, women with experience serving in similar establishments in New York City, despite the fact that, overall, waitresses outnumber waiters by nearly four to one. To see if comparable restaurants hire women, Sara Rab and I conducted a survey of elite restaurants in New York City. We found that two-thirds of the elite restaurants in New York hired women, but the more expensive the dinner, the fewer the women servers. We found a similar pattern in Philadelphia. Servers in our sample of elite restaurants brought home an average annual salary of about \$45,000, compared with less than \$20,000 in less expensive establishments. Our findings are consistent with an experiment conducted on 65 Philadelphia restaurants by economist David Neumark, who directed pairs of men and women matched for their credentials to apply for jobs as servers. In high-priced restaurants, women were 35 percent less likely than men to receive an interview, and 40 percent less likely to receive a job offer. The hiring decisions of managers clearly contribute to the disparate placement and earnings of waiters and waitresses.

into medicine, business, and other fields as professional schools in these fields opened their doors. These examples suggest that the gender stereotypes with which women grow up do not prevent them from seizing new opportunities as they become available.

And the things men and women say they want from their jobs are more similar than different. For example, Allison Konrad has shown that men and women overlap a great deal in the specific features of jobs they rank as important. In other words, gender segregation cannot be reduced to what men and women look for in jobs.

hitting a wall?

The early 1980s was a period of great energy and optimism both for research and policy on occupational gender segregation. An entirely new dimension of social inequality appeared to be open for exploration—not an everyday event. Comparable worth—the idea of equalizing pay not only for the same work, but also for work of comparable value—seemed a realistic and even imminent possibility. Women were making notable strides, entering new occupations and receiving graduate training in professions such as law, medicine and

business. And women's entry into male fields even helped the women who remained in female fields. Fields such as nursing and teaching now face severe shortages, which stimulate higher wages for these undervalued professions.

At that time I was confident that these trends would continue, while some other analysts feared that the rate of change was so slow that it would take many decades to rectify the gender disparities at work. As it turns out, even the skeptics were too optimistic. Progress toward greater gender integration of occupations largely ground to a halt during the 1990s. The most widely used measure of segregation is the "index of dissimilarity," which measures the proportion of women who would have to change fields in order to be represented across types of occupations in the same proportions as men are. (Zero represents complete integration; 100 complete segregation.) This index fell from 67 in 1970 to 60 in 1980 to 56 in 1990, and then to 52 by 2000. But the modest change that occurred during the 1990s was almost all due to shifts in the size of occupations, rather than greater integration within occupations. (The more integrated occupational groups—professionals, technical workers, managers and sales occupations—grew, while the more segregated occupational groups—clerical workers and craft workers—declined.) More mixing within occupations did not happen in the 1990s.



Photo by David Bacon

A framing carpenter. Despite gains in the legal and medical professions, very few women are employed in the building trades.



Photo by David Bacon

Female workers iron napkins at a commercial laundry. Low-paid textile industry work including sewing, ironing, cleaning, and folding are dominated by female workers, but men dominate high-paying jobs such as upholstery and tailoring.

Stagnation is evident in several related areas as well. The gender gap in median weekly earnings has been stuck at the same level since 1993—76 percent in 2001—and segregation by gender across medical specialties actually inched upward during the 1990s.

Why has the gender integration of occupations slowed to a crawl? A longer view suggests that this stability is typical and it is the unusual changes of the 1970s and 1980s that need to be explained. For most of the century gender differentiation remained roughly constant, despite economic booms and depressions, revolutions in marriage, fertility, and divorce, and the incremental but inexorable entry of women into the labor force.

Social change often occurs in brief intervals followed by periods of renewed stagnation. The feminist movement of the late 1960s and 1970s challenged many traditional assumptions, but

its force waned by the late 1980s. The idea that a woman could do anything a man could do had tremendous force, but gradually was contested by the notion that women have special values and strengths which should be better appreciated. And inevitably a backlash against ostensibly special treatment challenged affirmative action and other measures designed to broaden opportunities for women and minorities.

Gender integration occurred largely through women entering formerly male-dominated settings. Few men showed interest in breaking into the pink-collar frontier. The stigma of doing “women’s work,” coupled with low pay, makes many jobs performed by women unattractive to men. The puzzle, of course, is why women have not left traditional female fields in even greater numbers for the better pay, benefits, promotion opportunities, and even job flexibility found in many men’s occupations. Since women continue to join the labor market in ever greater numbers and take shorter and shorter breaks from work for childbearing, one would expect that they would continue to seek out avenues toward economic self-sufficiency. Such commitments to work should keep the pressure on to open male-dominated fields. Yet, while some pressure continues, many women have sought economic independence by the alternative and time-honored route of enrolling in higher education.

degrees of difference

Women first surpassed men in obtaining bachelor’s degrees in 1982, and the gap continues to widen. In 1998, the most current data available, 56 percent of bachelor’s degrees went to women. Before long, college graduates will probably be roughly 60:40 women to men, or a 1.5 to 1 ratio of young women to young men. Women are even more disproportionately concentrated among associate degree recipients, and are at parity with men in garnering master’s and professional degrees.



Photo by David Bacon

Nursing remains a largely female occupation.



Table staff at upscale restaurants are likely to be male; at low-priced restaurants, female.

Women's domination of undergraduate education represents a remarkable turn of events. Just 40 years ago, men were earning two-thirds of college degrees, and just 20 years ago, men and women were at parity. While many expected and welcomed women's catching up to men in educational attainment, I am not aware of anyone—economist, sociologist or educator—who predicted that women would surpass men by so much so quickly. What happened?

The surge in women's education is probably linked to gender segregation at work in several ways. First, women realize that the low wages that they face in unskilled women's jobs do not offer a living wage. In 1998, women with a high school degree working full-time, year-round brought home a median income of \$22,800 a year; high school dropouts earned \$16,700. Male high school graduates made \$31,200 a year on average (\$24,000 for high school dropouts). Young men consequently have less of a pressing need to pursue higher education. If skilled crafts and other relatively high-wage jobs open to male high school graduates were equally open to women, it is possible that fewer women would pursue higher education.

Second, by seeking specific vocational credentials, women gain some protection against hiring discrimination. If a pharmacy position requires a master's degree, women with such a diploma can expect that they will be given serious consideration.



This satellite elementary school was constructed on the site of a Hewlett Packard facility in Santa Rosa, California to attract and retain women workers who have children.

Many women returning to higher education do so to pursue particular vocational degree programs, to become nurse's aides, to get a teacher's certificate and to update office skills. The laundry list of rationalizations for turning away women is less readily



Former site of a university employment office. Increasing women's participation in male-dominated occupations may require expanded child care services as well as programs of affirmative recruitment and advancement.

available in professional settings, especially when there is a tight market for highly specialized skills. Accordingly, sex segregation has declined more sharply for college graduates than for those with fewer educational credentials.

Finally, the educational credentials women garner are themselves segregated, which limits the financial returns they can expect. In a national survey of the college class of 1999, I found that women college seniors expected to earn 30 percent less than their male classmates when they reached age 30, and the field of the degree they were pursuing explained the largest slice of this gap.

Women are pursuing a broader set of college programs than in the past, but here too change has slowed. About 30 percent of women would have to change fields to match their male counterparts, a difference that has been roughly constant since the mid-1980s. Biology, business and math are among the fields that have reached a rough gender balance. Engineering and the physical sciences (astronomy, chemistry and physics) remain male-dominated fields while psychology, education, nursing, and the romance languages are leading feminine fields of study. Girls are increasingly taking math and science in high school and testing better in those subjects, but this convergence in courses and scores has not translated into a convergence in college majors.

looking toward 2020

While forecasting trends is treacherous, it seems safe to predict that the gender segregation of jobs in the year 2020 will resemble current patterns. The major engines of gender integration have all lost steam. There are two ways in which women enter male fields: by starting their careers there or by

switching later in life. The numbers taking either route have shrunk in recent years and are no longer enough to make up for the women who drop out of male-dominated careers.

As a result, it seems unrealistic to expect total gender integration. Basic changes in the way work is structured are needed, but we are in a period of political retrenchment, with bold new proposals unlikely to gain serious attention. Further reductions in occupational segregation will take another wave of political, cultural, social and economic reforms like those initiated during the 1960s. Specific policy measures would include: vigorous enforcement of anti-discrimination laws; training programs that target highly gender-typed fields; and a broad reconsideration of

the value of women's work, especially caregiving work. Restructuring of working time to make all jobs parent-friendly is needed so that responsible parents (mostly women) are not trapped in so-called 'mommy track' positions or part-time jobs with no job security or employment benefits. Specifically, policies that reduce the length of the work week—especially for professionals and managers—could reduce work-family conflict, increase the time working parents can spend with their children and advance gender equality at work. Reducing artificial gender barriers at work can improve economic efficiency while promoting gender equity. Recruiting more women into fields such as computer science and engineering could help to provide much needed talent in these areas, while recruiting more men to be elementary school teachers would help solve the looming national shortages we face in this area. There are many simple and effective measures that can be taken to broaden opportunities for women at work. We simply need the political will. Of course, the gender gap in voting—women were 11 percentage points more likely to vote for Gore than Bush in 2000—could return gender equality to the center of public policy discussions and put the labor force back on a course of incremental progress toward gender equality.

Most observers view the large and growing number of women in colleges and universities as yet another indication of how far women have come. But this welcome development may also have a darker side, as it reflects in part the continued obstacles women face in obtaining high-paying jobs that require no diploma. In other words, until we see more women wearing mechanic's overalls, we can expect to see more and more women marching in caps and gowns at graduation. ■



Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society

World War II poster encouraging the employment of women in diverse occupations.

recommended resources

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Cotter, David A., JoAnn M. DeFiore, Joan M. Hermesen, Breda M. Kowalewski, and Reeve Vanneman. "All Women Benefit: The Macro-Level Effect of Occupational Integration on Gender Earnings Inequality." *American Sociological Review* 62 (October 1997): 714-734. An analysis of the impact of gender segregation on women's wages.

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Williams, Christine L. *Gender Differences at Work: Women and Men in Nontraditional Occupations*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989. Case studies of female Marines and male nurses.